

Pratfall in Damascus

Nancy Pelosi's foolish shuttle diplomacy

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HOUSE SPEAKER Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) offered an excellent demonstration yesterday of why members of Congress should not attempt to supplant the secretary of state when traveling abroad. After a meeting with Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, Ms. Pelosi announced that she had delivered a message from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert that "Israel was ready to engage in peace talks" with Syria. What's more, she added, Mr. Assad was ready to "resume the peace process" as well. Having announced this seeming diplomatic breakthrough, Ms. Pelosi suggested that her Kissingerian shuttle diplomacy was just getting started. "We expressed our interest in using our good offices in promoting peace between Israel and Syria," she said.

Only one problem: The Israeli prime minister entrusted Ms. Pelosi with no such message. "What was communicated to the U.S. House Speaker does not contain any change in the policies of Israel," said a statement quickly issued by the prime minister's office. In fact, Mr. Olmert told Ms. Pelosi that "a number of Senate and House members who recently visited Damascus received the impression that despite the declarations of Bashar Assad, there is no change in the position of his country regarding a possible peace process with Israel." In other words, Ms. Pelosi not only misrepresented Israel's position but was virtually alone in failing to discern that Mr. Assad's words were mere propaganda.

Ms. Pelosi was criticized by President Bush for visiting Damascus at a time when the administration -- rightly or wrongly -- has frozen high-level contacts with Syria. Mr. Bush said that thanks to the speaker's freelancing Mr. Assad was getting mixed messages from the United States. Ms. Pelosi responded by pointing out that Republican congressmen had visited Syria without drawing presidential censure. That's true enough - - but those other congressmen didn't try to introduce a new U.S. diplomatic initiative in the Middle East. "We came in friendship, hope, and determined that the road to Damascus is a road to peace," Ms. Pelosi grandly declared.

Never mind that that statement is ludicrous: As any diplomat with knowledge of the region could have told Ms. Pelosi, Mr. Assad is a corrupt thug whose overriding priority at the moment is not peace with Israel but heading off U.N. charges that he orchestrated the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri. The really striking development here is the attempt by a Democratic congressional leader to substitute her own foreign policy for that of a sitting Republican president. Two weeks ago Ms. Pelosi rammed legislation through the House of Representatives that would strip Mr. Bush of his authority as commander in chief to manage troop movements in Iraq. Now she is attempting to introduce a new Middle East policy that directly conflicts with that of the president. We have found much to criticize in Mr. Bush's military strategy and regional

diplomacy. But Ms. Pelosi's attempt to establish a shadow presidency is not only counterproductive, it is foolish.